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ABSTRACT

Young children may experience stress and emotional problems in reaction to natural and other disasters. This brochure presents a number of strategies for teachers and caregivers to use to help children cope with this stress. These strategies include: (1) providing reassurance and physical comfort; (2) being aware of separation anxiety; (3) maintaining familiar daily patterns; (4) encouraging children to discuss, write, draw, or act out their experience and feelings; (5) reading aloud from storybooks with child characters who cope with stressful situations; (6) including play therapy in the curriculum; (7) aiding children in peaceful conflict resolution; and (8) creating emergency plans for future disasters. Providing family/parental programs and working with parents, as well as personal coping strategies for teachers and caregivers, are also discussed. Typical symptoms of stress in young children are delineated. Contains 15 references for children's books and 10 for further adult reading. (JA)

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When Disaster Strikes: Helping Young Children Cope

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Sometimes young children are the victims of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, fires, tornadoes, or hurricanes. For them, as for adults, these events are frightening and dangerous and may be overwhelming. Children may lose possessions, even their homes, and they will experience feelings of separation and loss. They may also lose friends when families leave the program or the area after a disaster. Children today also experience violent events, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, or large-scale accidents like airplane crashes. At such times, many children elsewhere in the country experience the disturbing events through television, radio, magazines, and newspapers, as well as in the distress of the adults around them.

When disaster strikes, anxiety and mental confusion lead to stress and emotional problems. Not only can the sudden and unexpected nature of many disasters cause high anxiety and even panic, but young children are also most fearful when they do not understand what is happening around them. Their feelings and reactions should be expected and considered natural.

When young children's usually predictable world becomes unpredictable, teachers and caregivers need to provide comfort, reassurance, and stability. Concerned and nurturing adults can provide guidance and understanding that will help restore a sense of security, well-being, and competence. The ways in which adults help children to work through their stress and emotional problems and to grow through their experience of a disaster will have a lasting effect on their well-being.

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By playing firefighter, doctor, or rescue worker after a disaster, children are able to feel big and strong and gain a measure of control over their trauma.

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What are the symptoms of stress in young children?

There are a number of symptoms and behaviors that young children may exhibit when they are experiencing stress. Children should be carefully observed for these warning signals that indicate they are experiencing difficulties.

Crying and whining. Children become upset easily. They cry and whine, often about minor events unrelated to the disaster.

Regressive behaviors. When children are anxious, they return to behaviors of their earlier stages, such as thumb sucking, bed-wetting, loss of toilet training, clinging, and wanting to be held.

Separation anxiety and fear of being left alone. Separation anxiety is heightened by sudden and unexpected situations. When children are afraid, they do not want to be left alone or separated from their loved ones. They may fear being abandoned. They may refuse to go to school or child care.

Sleep disorders. Sleep disorders are common when children are upset. They may resist going to bed or have a difficult time settling down at naptime or bedtime. They may experience fear of the dark, wake up often at night, be afraid to sleep alone, and have nightmares. Young children have difficulty distinguishing the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Their mixed-up feelings—combining fears of the disaster they have experienced with their fantasies about such things as monsters and giants—may increase their anxiety.

Illness. Children may have physical symptoms as a result of their stress. They may experience headaches and stomachaches, vomit, or run a fever.

Changes in normal patterns of behavior. When children experience powerful emotions, they will act out their feelings. Some children experiencing stress become more active, restless, and irritable. Other children may become quiet and withdrawn and not want to talk about what is bothering them.

Aggression. Children who feel out of control want to strike out. They exhibit aggression and anger. They may hit, kick, bite, or throw objects, often with little provocation.

Fear. Children have fears about disasters, such as earthquakes, fires, and hurricanes, recurring. Sometimes they mistakenly believe that they are the cause of a disaster. Because children construct their own understandings of the disaster, the fears that develop are different from child to child—and many are based on inaccurate perceptions.

Feelings of neglect. With teachers, parents, and other adults struggling to cope with the disaster and its stress, children may feel neglected. When caregivers are overwhelmed by trauma in their own lives, they have difficulty providing the support, love, and security that the young children in their care need.

Delayed reactions. After a traumatic experience, some children may not exhibit symptoms of stress and anxiety for weeks or months, or even a year, but delayed reactions of fear and anxiety are just as real as those that occur immediately after the trauma.

Strategies to help children cope

What can be done to help children who have experienced a disaster? Children need emotional support. They need to know that someone is there to take care of them. Since children need the time, space, and materials to work through emotional reactions, staff need to consider some modifications to the usual program, as suggested here. They also need to maintain familiar routines in order to give children a sense of security. As far as possible, children's families need to be involved in a partnership with the program to help in the recovery process.

Give reassurance and physical comfort. Physically holding children brings comfort and a sense of security. Children need extra hugs, smiles, and hand-holding. Reassure them that they are safe and that there is someone there to take care of them. Hearing a teacher or family member say, "I will take care of you," makes children feel safe. Young children have great faith in adults' powers and are responsive to adult reassurances. Model and demonstrate coping skills, because children will imitate adults in reacting to the situation.

Be aware of separation issues. It is natural for children to be afraid of being alone after a disaster. Children may resist coming to the program until they begin to deal with their anxiety and fear. Some children, especially younger ones, may fare best when they can remain at home for a few days. Encourage family members to stay longer, if necessary, when they bring their children. Reassure them that separation anxiety is their child's normal reaction to an abnormal situation. When children have difficulty parting from the family member who brings them, suggest that they bring a favorite object from home. Such a tangible reminder often serves as a source of comfort. Some children like having a night-light or flashlight to help them deal with anxiety about going to sleep at naptime or a fear of the lights going out, as during a storm, earthquake, or tornado.

Provide structure throughout the day and set limits. Children need to find consistency and security in the routines of the program when the rest of their life is unpredictable. Provide a framework that will be the same from day to day. Emphasize familiar routines at playtime, clean-up, naptime, lunch, and snack. Play soothing music and model moving slowly and using a quiet voice during transitions, toileting, and hand washing. Children may have a difficult time accepting routines and other limits, but persevere by being firm and supportive to maintain discipline. Make decisions for children when they cannot cope with choice.

Welcome children's talking about the disaster. Children regain a sense of control by talking about things that bother them, and talking with a supportive adult can help them clarify their concepts and feelings. At the same time, children should not be pressured to talk; they may need time to absorb their experiences before discussing them. To help children feel comfortable talking about their feelings, adults can share their own feelings of fear and anxiety, but they should always do so in a calm, reassuring way. For example, a teacher might say, "I was frightened when the tornado/flood was nearby, but I knew there were people who were ready to help out" or "I remember being worried when the lights went out during the storm. I was glad I knew we had a flashlight in my desk drawer." What children need most is to feel that the situation is under control. Adults should also take care not to belittle children's feelings by telling them, "It's nothing to be afraid of."

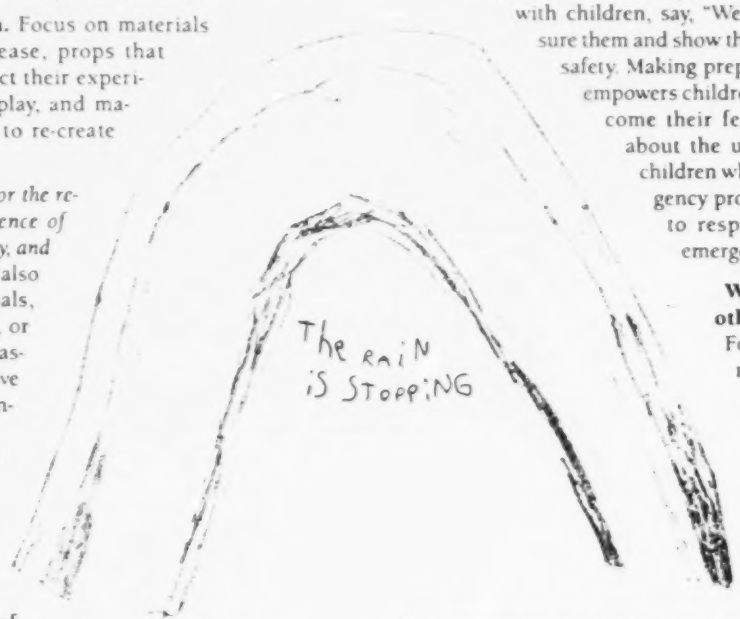
Talk with the children about their roles in the events of the disaster. As you remember together, an oral history of shared recollections of the earthquake, hurricane, flood, or fire emerges. In reminding children of their part, talk in positive terms: "You were brave" or "You were a big help."

Make opportunities for children to write or dictate stories and to create pictures about their experiences. Encourage children to tell you stories about what happened by saying, "Tell me your story." Write down their words and read the stories to them. Keep copies to reread and to make a class storybook about the disaster. Easel paintings and

drawings can also tell the story of the children's experiences. These stories and pictures reflecting what children are thinking and feeling are a starting point for talking about their fears and concerns.

Read books. Read children's books that deal with some of the same fears and feelings of separation and loss that children are experiencing in their lives. As they listen to how the characters react to frightening experiences, these books will give them an opportunity to express their own feelings. You can connect them to the story by suggesting, "That's just what happened to us" or "Do you remember how loud the thunder was?" Use simple, accurate information books to help explain and clarify concepts. Ask children, "What do you know about floods (earthquakes, etc.)?" and "What would you like to know?" The better able they are to understand the disaster, the better they can deal with it.

Adapt the curriculum. Focus on materials that provide tension release, props that children can use to reenact their experiences through dramatic play, and materials that they can use to re-create the disturbing events.



- *Give children more time for the relaxing, therapeutic experience of playing with sand, water, clay, and playdough.* Children may also want to use these materials, along with twigs, pebbles, or blocks, to re-create the disaster, but adults should leave the initiation of such reenactments to the children.
- *Provide plenty of time and opportunity for children to work out their concerns and feelings through dramatic play.* Make available props that children can use to enact the roles of safety officer, firefighter, doctor, rescue worker, or other helpers. In dramatic play, children can pretend that they are big and strong to gain control over their trauma and to overcome feelings of helplessness. They can also express their feelings of fear and anxiety by re-creating their experience.
- *Spend more time in settings that give children opportunities for physical activity and that provide an emotional release.* Sometimes being outdoors promotes a sense of well-being, not only because it is less confining but also because children may have experienced the original trauma indoors, for instance, when earthquake tremors caused things to fall down around them. In other instances, such as after a hurricane, children may feel safer indoors for a few days or weeks.

Model peaceful resolution to conflict. Peaceful resolution to conflict is one way to give children a stronger sense of power and control, especially critical in the wake of a disaster, which leaves them feeling powerless. Because children who have experienced the emotional trauma and violence of disaster often behave aggressively, they need to see alternatives to using violence to solve problems. When conflicts arise, help children use social problem-solving techniques, including identifying the problem, brainstorming positive solutions, and choosing a solution that will satisfy all of those involved.

Make emergency plans. Children may fear a future disaster. Make emergency plans with them. Talk about what to do and where to go in a thunderstorm, hurricane, or tornado, and how to get out in case of fire, flood, earthquake, or other disasters. As you discuss these procedures with children, say, "We have a plan," to reassure them and show them you care about their safety. Making preparations for the future empowers children and helps them overcome their feelings of helplessness about the unknown. In addition, children who have practiced emergency procedures are better able to respond calmly in a real emergency.

Work with parents and other significant adults. Following the disaster, make suggestions to families on helping children cope. Send a letter home telling parents what you are doing in the program to help their children. Encourage parents to minimize their children's exposure to TV broadcasts about the disaster, since these tend to intensify fears. Suggest that families include the children in the clean-up and recovery process, if possible, because working to help bring life back to normal is reassuring. Refer families to community agencies and support groups. Explain to parents that their attitudes and actions will influence their children's reactions. A common reaction is for parents, in their great relief that their children are OK, to be more lenient than usual. This tendency may also be fueled by parents' guilt feelings, irrational but often powerful, because they were unable to protect their children against the disaster. Help families to understand that after traumatic events children need the security of the usual limits and routines rather than extra indulgence.

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Playing with sand, water, or playdough is relaxing and therapeutic for children who have experienced traumatic, stressful events.

In the days and weeks after a disaster, planning family-oriented activities in the program setting gives children and family members a place to feel safe together as they reestablish their lives. After Hurricane Andrew, one Florida program held family breakfasts or lunches. Another helpful step is providing a comfortable place for parents to gather to share daily events and concerns—and ask questions of staff—without having to talk in front of the children and run the risk of raising their anxieties. Parents greatly appreciate programs helping in such ways as providing a list of local babysitters and drop-off centers, setting up a lending library of books and toys for children to take home (especially if families have lost everything in their homes), and referring families to community resources.

When to seek professional help. Some children appear to return to normal behavior within a few days, while others take weeks or months. Even after a year or two, some children's behavior shows that they are still dealing with the disaster. If a child's fears, worries, or behavior problems are intense and persistent (or increasing) over a period of several weeks or months, staff may want to suggest that parents consult a mental health professional. In conferring with parents, however, staff members need to be sensitive to the fact that children who are having trouble dealing with a traumatic event often have a family member who is having difficulty as well.

Program staff: Taking care of yourself

Find someone to talk to. Don't try to ignore your thoughts and feelings and needs. Talking about your experiences and acknowledging your worries will help you work through the disaster. Taking care of one's own fears and anxieties (and, in some cases, guilt feelings) as promptly as possible is very important for adults who are taking care of children. Of course, you need to take care not to talk with other adults about your distress when children are present. If your anxieties persist or you become depressed, contact local postdisaster mental health services to find professional help.

Try to keep a balance in your life. You have to take care of yourself in order to help others to cope. Maintain familiar routines. Pay attention to your health. Don't forget to eat, and although you may have difficulty sleeping, try to get adequate rest and exercise. Meet with program staff to discuss their needs, as well as those of children, and find ways to collaborate and help each other. For instance, staff members can take turns bringing healthy snacks to share. Recognize that at some stage each one of you may need a day off to "crash."

Don't push yourself (or the curriculum). Difficulty in making decisions and in thinking creatively is a normal reaction to disaster. Because you may not be able to function as efficiently as usual, plan extra time for usual tasks at home and in the program. Don't hurry yourself or the children through activities and transition times or take on special projects. New activities and materials can wait. Plan

to use the same basic resources each day—sand, water, blocks, playdough, writing materials, easel painting, dramatic play, and favorite songs and stories—as you and the children work through the recovery process together.

Prepare ahead. When you are adequately prepared, you and the children in your group will experience a less severe emotional reaction to disaster. All staff need to take disaster-preparedness training, and in areas at special risk for natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes), training for these specific disasters is imperative. Make disaster plans for your program and practice emergency procedures with the children. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will set up disaster centers to provide assistance and referrals to crisis counseling (call 1-800-525-0321, which is answered in Spanish and English). For emergency needs contact local offices of the American Red Cross.

Information books for children

Simple information can be shared individually, or in small groups, as children bring up questions. These books are appropriate for 3- through 7-year-olds.

Branley, F.M. 1985. *Flash, crash, rumble, and roll*. New York: HarperCollins. Reassures children about how and why thunderstorms occur. Good for sharing in a small group. [Also by Branley: *Tornado alert* (1988) and *Earthquakes* (1990).]

Erlbach, A. 1993. *Hurricanes*. Chicago: Children's Press. Describes the power of hurricanes, and discusses emergency plans and preparedness. [Also by Erlbach: *A new true book: Tornadoes* (1994) and *A new true book: Floods* (1994).]

Gibbons, G. 1984. *Fire! Fire!* New York: Crowell. Gives information about fires and firefighting. Well-illustrated text includes fighting an apartment fire and a wildfire.

Simon, S. 1992. *Storms*. New York: Mulberry. Includes facts, photos, and safety information on thunderstorms, hailstorms, lightning, tornadoes, and hurricanes. [Also by Simon: *Earthquakes* (1995).]

Children's fiction

Aliki. 1984. *Feelings*. New York: Greenwillow. The illustrations are a catalog of emotions, giving children words to identify and explain their feelings.

Babbitt, N. 1970. *The something*. New York: Farrar, Strauss. Mylo worries about something coming into his room at night. Making a clay model of it calms his fears.

Hoban, R. 1960. *Bedtime for Frances*. Harper. Read aloud book reflecting specific fears of children at bedtime.

Joose, B.M. 1991. *Mama do you love me?* New York: Scholastic. Things get lost and broken, but caring about people doesn't change. An Inuit mother reassures her child that love does not go away in difficult times.

Peters, L.W. 1988. *The sun, the wind, and the rain*. New York: Holt. Simple scientific concepts relating to the forces of nature are explained through a beautifully illustrated story of a girl building a sand castle.

Seeger, P. 1986. *Abiyoyo*. New York: Macmillan. A monster is vanquished by music. The story encourages children to explore their feelings through dramatic play.

Wallace, I. 1984. *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance*. New York: Atheneum. A young boy becomes frightened and runs away, but finds a friend who helps him overcome his fears. Good to read at large or small group times.

Waber, B. 1972. *Ira sleeps over*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin. A young child's need for his security blanket.

Wahl, J. 1988. *Humphrey's bear*. New York: Holt. A comforting story that emphasizes the need for a familiar object, a teddy bear at bedtime.

Weisner, D. 1990. *Hurricane*. New York: Clarion. After the hurricane, a fallen tree becomes a place of magical adventure. Encourages children to tell about loss and damage at their homes.

Williams, L. 1986. *The little old lady who was not afraid of anything*. New York: Crowell. An interactive and rhythmic tale about feeling scared. Excellent for group time and as a flannel-board story.

For further information

Carlsson-Paige, N., & D.E. Levin. 1992. Making peace in violent times: A constructivist approach to conflict resolution. *Young Children* 48 (1): 4-13.

Furman, R.A. 1995. Helping children cope with stress and deal with feelings. *Young Children* 50 (2): 33-41.

Garbarino, J., N. Dubrow, K. Kostelny, & C. Pardo. 1992. The healing role of play and art. In *Children in danger: Coping with the consequences of community violence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Head Start Bureau. 1994. *Responding to young children under stress: A skill-based training guide for classroom teams*. GPO No. 515-032/03010. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families.

Honig, A.S. 1986. Stress and coping in young children (parts 1 & 2). *Young Children* 41 (4): 51-63; 41 (5): 47-59.

Jalongo, M. 1987. Do security blankets belong in preschool? *Young Children* 42 (3): 37-38.

MacIsaac, P., & S. King. 1989. What did you do with Sophie, teacher? *Young Children* 48 (6): 80-84.

McCracken, J.B., ed. 1986. *Reducing stress in young children's lives*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

McKee, J.S. 1990. Play-activity centers for the whole child (Chapter 2); Contemporary stressors (Chapter 4). In J.S. McKee, ed., *The developing kindergarten: Programs, children, and teachers*. East Lansing, MI: MIAEYC.

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